



THE IMPACT OF HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION ON CHILDREN

By Dr. Kendal Hirschi

Chronic hunger and malnutrition are global concerns. Although technology continues to advance crop productivity and nutrient content, these gains are not being adequately delivered to the world's poor. In fact, in most regions of the world the proportion of undernourished people is increasing. The most troubling aspect of this pandemic is the effect this condition has on children as 6 million children under the age of five die of hunger each year.

Malnourished children also suffer from "hidden" hunger. This is often caused by inadequate intake of vitamins A and C, iron, zinc, folate and other so-called "micronutrients" which are found in fruits and vegetables. Stunted development and depleted strength are readily apparent in these malnourished children; however, this hunger also impacts children's mood and intelligence. Studies have shown that micronutrient deficiencies cause lower mental and motor functions. In addition, these malnourished children exhibit increased depression and anxiety.

As diets normally do not lack a single micronutrient, but a wide range of them, strategies should work towards enhancing total energy and micronutrient uptake. An intervention strategy that is sustainable without external support and has the ability to simultaneously combat multiple micronutrient deficiencies is what is urgently needed. Dietary diversifying, which is central to food based approaches, can meet these needs. Once the framework for the strategy is in place, local and national leadership is needed to implement the strategy.

Currently, agricultural policies largely emphasize primary agricultural production and do not have micronutrient outcomes among its goals. Accordingly, the thrust is mainly on staples which provide energy and protein, with much less emphasis on fruits and vegetables. Efforts need to be directed toward the cultivation of vegetables and fruits in communities. A well-developed policy and leadership needs to be established which supports small-scale farming systems that maximize outputs of micronutrient-rich foods. For example, the program should include subsistence farmers, families, kitchen gardens, schools, orphanages and community groups.

Governments need to acknowledge that the micronutrient deficiency problem exists and they should take the lead in bringing to public attention the magnitude of the problem. This is an enormous task considering the magnitude of the problem and other institutions such as humanitarian organizations, churches, local community groups, civic groups, can and should play important roles. The goal is not just to save children's lives, but to allow all children the opportunity to thrive.

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